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ABSTRACT

A study compared the communication apprehension of basic studies (underprepared) and nonbasic studies college students in four contexts: (1) group, (2) interpersonal, (3) meetings, and (4) public communication. Subjects were 238 male and 209 female undergraduate students enrolled in the required basic communication course at the University of Bridgeport (Connecticut). A Likert-type instrument was used to assess levels of communication apprehension over the four contexts. Results indicated no difference in male and female students relative to either group or interpersonal communication apprehension; however, significant differences were found between male and female in the meeting and public communication contexts, with the females displaying higher levels of apprehension. There was actually less frequency of high communication apprehension in basic students than in regular college students, though the differences between the two populations was not found to be significant. A possible explanation for the results is that certain high school subpopulations utilize communication skills to make up for academic deficiencies. Identifying further subcategories in the underprepared student population could lead to new classroom strategies in the teaching of these groups. (JL)

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A COMPARISON OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION IN BASIC STUDIES AND NON-BASIC STUDIES STUDENTS

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A COMPARISON OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION IN BASIC STUDIES AND NON-BASIC STUDIES STUDENTS

A recent trend in higher education involves an increasing number of underprepared students enrolled in basic communication courses. For a variety of philosophical, educational, and financial consideration, "high risk" students are being permitted to participate in basic communication courses (cf., Riley, 1981). These students differ from the traditional undergraduate population along several criteria: (1) lower than average GPA in high school; (2) lower than average ACT or SAT scores; (3) lower than average emotional maturity; and (4) lower than average self-control (cf., Riley, 1981; Watson, 1981).

Research in the area of communication apprehension (CA) indicates a number of striking similarities in the profile of the communication apprehensive student and that of the underprepared student. Highly communication apprehensive students score generally lower on standardized learning measures such as ACT and SAT scores (McCroskey & Andersen, 1976). Further, research indicates a moderately high negative correlation between CA and emotional maturity and self-control (McCroskey, Daly, & Sorensen, 1976). Moreover, CA is significantly related

to reduced self-esteem (e.g., Snavely & Sullivan, 1976) and reduced tolerance for ambiguity (McCroskey, Daly & Sorensen, 1976), characteristics which intuitively appear applicable to the underprepared college student.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As a result of the similarities between high CA's and underprepared college students, it would appear appropriate to investigate the distribution of communication apprehension in the population of underprepared college students. Previous research indicates that approximately 20% of the population experiences high levels of CA (cf., McCroskey, 1977; McCroskey & Richmond, 1980). Therefore, the first research question examined in the present investigation was:

Q1: Is there a greater frequency of high CA's in the underprepared student population than in the general college population?

Following the above line of reasoning, it would also appear that underprepared college students might experience higher levels of CA than other college students. A recent reconceptualization of CA suggests that apprehension levels may differ across communication situations (McCroskey, 1981). Four communication contexts have been identified as contributing to generalized trait-like CA. These contexts include: (1) group, (2) interpersonal, (3) meetings, and (4) public communication situations (McCroskey & Richmond, 1980). There is, as yet, little research on communication apprehension in underprepared

college students to suggest differences in their level of CA across the four contexts. However, the learned helplessness explanation of the development of CA suggests that individuals learn to feel anxious in situations where they perceive little control over their own fate (cf., McCroskey & Richmond, 1980). Since it is appropriate to assume that underprepared students are more likely to perceive class meetings as potentially ego-threatening situations than they would the other communication contexts (cf., Andriate, 1981), the following research questions were investigated:

Q2: Do underprepared college students experience significantly higher levels of trait-like CA than other college students?

Q3: Do underprepared college students experience significantly different levels of CA in class meetings than do other college students?

In addition, the remaining three subdivisions of the PRCA-24 were also examined concerning student preparation CA level:

Q4: Do underprepared college students experience significantly higher levels of CA in groups than do other college students?

Q5: Do underprepared college students experience significantly higher levels of CA in interpersonal interaction situations than do other college students?

Q6: Do underprepared college students experience significantly higher levels of CA in public (speaking) situations than do other college students?

SUBJECT SELECTION AND PROCEDURES

Communication apprehension tests were administered to 447 undergraduate students enrolled in the required basic course at the University of Bridgeport at the beginning of the 1981 fall

semester. The subject pool contained 238 males and 209 females. One hundred and fourteen of the subjects were enrolled as basic studies (underprepared) students. Two hundred and sixty-two subjects had selected the course in interpersonal communication to satisfy their basic requirement and 185 were enrolled in the public communication sections.

Instrument

Communication apprehension was conceptualized in terms of trait-like anxiety associated with four separate oral communication situations. Communication apprehension was operationally defined as the score received on the 24 item Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) (McCloskey, 1981). The PRCA-24 is a self-report Likert-type instrument which is highly correlated with the PRCA-25 and has demonstrated internal reliability coefficients of .96 (McCroskey, 1981). The PRCA-24 was selected in order to assess levels of communication apprehension over four separate contexts examined in the present investigation.

Statistical Analyses

Preliminary analysis of the data were conducted to compare the subject population with previous CA research. Four one-way ANOVA procedures, using two levels of biological sex to predict each of the sub-scales on the PRCA-24, were employed to examine differences in male and female apprehension. An additional ANOVA procedure, using two levels of biological sex to predict overall trait-like CA, was also employed.

The first research question was analyzed using simple frequency data for the distribution of CA in both the underprepared and regular college populations. A mean plus or minus one standard deviation was employed to determine high levels of CA for each population. The second and third research questions were examined using a series of five one-way ANOVA procedures. The research model employed two levels of student preparation (basic studies vs. non-basic studies) to predict trait-like apprehension overall and in each of the four contexts examined by the PRCA-24. An alpha level of .05 was utilized in all tests of statistical significance.

RESULTS

No significant difference was found between male and female students relative to either group or interpersonal communication apprehension. However, significant differences in apprehension were found to exist between males and females in the meeting ($F = 6.152$, $df = 1/445$, $p < .05$), and public ($F = 14.030$, $df = 1/445$, $p < .05$) communication contexts. The males and females in this population were also found to be significantly different relative to overall, trait-like apprehension ($F = 6.012$, $df = 1/445$, $p < .05$). (See TABLE 1.)

The results showed that there was actually less frequency of high communication apprehension among the underprepared or basic study students than among the regular college population. Of the basic studies students ($n = 114$), 15 (13.1%) were highly CA. In the so-called normal college population ($n = 333$), 80 students

(24.2%) were highly communication apprehensive. When the two sample populations were confirmed, 21.7% was the overall figure for those who were highly apprehensive. Despite the fact that more students in the regular or non-basic studies population were found to be highly apprehension, the difference between the two populations was not significant either in terms of meetings, groups, interpersonal, public or overall trait-like apprehension (See TABLE 2.)

DISCUSSION

The mean relative to apprehension was significantly higher for females in both meeting and public contexts. In previous studies females have reported slightly higher levels of apprehension but these differences have not always been meaningful (McCroskey, Simposon, & Richmond, 1980). The results of the present investigation suggests that females may demonstrate significantly higher communication apprehension in some contexts, but not in others. The fact that females seem to express greater apprehension in both class meetings and public speaking situations should be of particular concern to communication educators.

The results of this study support previous research suggesting that higher levels of apprehension are no more prevalent among underprepared college students than among the so-called normal population (cf., Watson, 1981). In fact, the data reported here suggests that high levels of CA may be less of a problem in the underprepared college population. The 21.7% of high apprehensives in the overall sample compares with the twenty percent estimate

reported in apprehensive literature (McCroskey, 1977). Interestingly, when the population was broken down, only 13.1% of the underprepared students demonstrated high levels of CA as compared with 24.2% of the regular population.

One possible explanation of this phenomena may lie in a compensatory relationship between communication skills and academic preparation. It may be appropriate to assume that certain high school sub-populations utilize communication skills to make up for deficiencies in academic areas. For example, ancedotes abound in the teaching profession of the athlete or cheer leader who have used personality and proficiency in persuasion to boost their grade relative to class work.

There seems to be considerable value in identifying the sub-categories which exist in the underprepared population. Differences in communication apprehension should be identified for each category of underprepared students. This analysis should also include a breakdown by sex, as the data reported here indicates real differences in male/female apprehension among the contexts examined. Differential classroom strategies could be developed for each significant sub-population identified.

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TABLE 1

LEVEL OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION BY SEX

PRCA	MALE	FEMALE	STD.DEVIATION	F RATIO	PROBABILITY
Group	14.5252	15.2488	4.8559	2.479	0.1161
Meeting	15.6849	16.7990	4.7661	6.152	0.0135
Interpersonal	14.5042	14.6699	4.5798	0.145	0.7033
Public	18.3697	20.1005	4.9449	14.030	0.0002
Overall	63.0840	66.8182	16.1556	6.012	0.0146

TABLE 2

LEVEL OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION BY BASIC STUDIES

PRCA	BASIC STUDIES	NON BASIC STUDIES	STD.DEVIATION	F RATIO	PROBABILITY
Group	14.3333	15.0450	4.8559	1.828	0.1771
Meeting	15.9035	16.3093	4.7661	0.615	0.4333
Interpersonal	14.5088	14.6066	4.5798	0.039	0.8442
Public	18.9386	19.2613	4.9449	0.361	0.5482
Overall	63.6842	65.2222	16.1556	0.769	0.3809